

## **Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist by John G. Roberts, Jr.**

The casket was plain unvarnished pine, and over it was draped the American flag. As I and fellow Rehnquist clerks carried that casket up the marble steps of the Supreme Court building, to the Great Hall, it occurred to a number of us that this was very fitting. For Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist was direct, straightforward, utterly without pretense — and a patriot who loved and served his country.

He was completely unaffected in manner. When strolling outside the Supreme Court with a law clerk to discuss a case, Justice Rehnquist would often be stopped by visiting tourists, and asked to take their picture as they posed on the courthouse steps. He looked like the sort of approachable fellow who would be happy to oblige, and he always did. Many families around the country have a photograph of themselves in front of the Supreme Court, not knowing it was taken by someone who sat on the Court longer than all but six Justices.

Chief Justice Rehnquist was so interesting in part because he was so interested — in just about everything. It was next to impossible to bring up a subject without hearing something new about it from the Chief. He could find something diverting in the most mundane topics. Among his favorite lines of verse were two from Thomas Grey's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard: “Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air.” Quoting those lines, he would regularly discuss at judicial conferences the less celebrated cases of a court term, pointing out the interesting aspects of legal craft implicated in those cases that might otherwise be overlooked. In law and life he overlooked little.

The fact that he was interested in so much, and could derive pleasure and satisfaction from little things, meant that he was not unduly swayed by big things. One year, when the Justices still regularly attended the State of the Union address, Justice Rehnquist did not — because it conflicted with the painting class he was taking at a local school. The Justice simply made the straightforward calculation that he would get more out of the class than the speech.

Although occasionally a stern figure on the bench, the Chief had a whimsical side. He was a great one for games — tennis, croquet, bridge, poker, and board games were favorites. I have never witnessed a more enthusiastic charades player. He excelled at trivia contests, and enjoyed small wagers on anything — athletic contests, presidential elections, the day of the first snowfall.

The Chief is a towering figure in American law, one of a handful of great Chief Justices. There will be time enough to assess and debate his impact on the law. For those of us fortunate enough to have known him, however, he will always be remembered first and foremost as a genuinely kind, thoughtful, and decent man.